

## Project Report:

# Reducing FGM/C and other HTPs to improve maternal health among women and girls in Tulla sub-city, Hawassa municipality, Southern Ethiopia

October 2015 - September 2018

A project of Disability and Development Partners and *Berhan Lehetsanet*

Funded by UK Aid Direct

## Summary

We set out to achieve a shift in behaviour and attitudes in the project area, through a series of interconnected community interventions to reduce the prevalence of female genital mutilation/cutting and other harmful traditional practices (including early/forced marriage, rape, abduction, GBV) among adolescent girls and young women. As a result, practices which were known to be unlawful as well as harmful, but which carried on beneath the radar, are now openly discussed and actively opposed by past and potential victims, including the girls themselves, their mothers, former practitioners, community and religious leaders, Health Extension Workers, and other government staff and duty-bearers.

This change has been linked with increasing empowerment of girls and women through opportunities for success in education and economic activity, creating entry points for tackling HTPs, and then for sustaining and extending the impact achieved. While we are confident of these initial impacts, the project's short time-span and limited resources mean that sustainability and extension within and beyond the target area will depend on the energy and ability of all participants, especially government agencies, to continue its thrust.

## Impact

The most immediate and direct beneficiaries have been girls and young women in the 12 kebeles of Tulla sub-city. The project provided an intensive programme of support to increase girls' retention and achievement in education – evidenced by improved exam results and progression, which schools are keen to replicate for other pupils – and hence also to reduce their susceptibility to HTPs. Young women have gained the confidence to reject HTPs themselves, and to speak out and act on behalf of others. They have had access to support and redress when harm has been done to them or to others. These changes will have a direct impact on their reproductive and maternal health, and that of their own children in future. This group includes girls and young women who have already experienced early marriage and childbirth (33% of girls at Tulla High School are married; 16% have babies), but have been supported to return to or stay in education.

All former FGM practitioners in Tulla have been effectively deterred from HTP activities, while gaining opportunities to retain their community standing through new alternative livelihoods, and becoming advocates against their former practices. We believe the project has benefited the whole community: men and women, boys and girls, by encouraging a perception of women and girls as valued, productive citizens.

The broad anti-HTP platform developed through the project has brought together schools, communities and government duty-bearers and other actors, and was designed to be sustainable without continued direct support from the implementing partners: to support lasting behaviour change, and to offer a model for

replication. We needed to take this non-confrontational empowerment and enabling approach to ensure government partner buy-in at a time when direct advocacy/rights-based projects were prohibited in Ethiopia, unless fully sanctioned through a bi-lateral aid agreement, and because of the extremely sensitive nature of the project. This had advantages and disadvantages: on the one hand, government collaborators have been effective agents, vital for acceptance, implementation, and post-project sustainability. On the other hand, this mediated approach reduced our ability to determine the terms of partnership, for example in terms of record-keeping and data; government officials, who are political appointees, can sometimes have different agendas and priorities. This led to some lack of clarity about the fundamental nature of the project: were we primarily seeking to empower girls? Or to combat HTP? In reality it was both.

The project's external evaluators confirmed the relevance of our approach and design, the effectiveness of a common platform against HTPs, and noted the positive changes that occurred during the project's lifetime – but also commented on the challenges in securing consistent and measurable evidence of change.

### **Key achievements**

Tulla's FGM practitioners have been 'turned' from their former trade, and significant number have gone on to become vocal advocates against HTPs (see case study below), adamant that their 'skills' will not be passed down to their own daughters. We believe this is a permanent change which has been achieved through sustained and persistent efforts, with training and attitude reinforcement done in stages, repeated as needed, and even in the final stages of the project including renewed training and support for their new life opportunities. The formal project sustainability agreement includes an undertaking that such support will continue after the project through government agencies.

This change has gone hand-in-hand with a whole-community commitment to shift away from the most harmful traditional practices. Key factors here were firstly that the implementing partner BL was already well known and respected in the area through previous projects with DDP, and enjoyed the support of community members and leaders. Secondly, that changes have been embedded in communities and made sustainable through continued efforts by government agents (through staff capacity building, resource transfer and formal commitment agreements) and the communities themselves (men and women - their leaders, anti-HTP committees, religious leaders etc) after formal project phase-out.

The role of religious leaders has emerged as a key factor in spreading and reinforcing project messages among their congregations (Christian and Muslim), with religious leaders' levels of engagement far higher than anticipated. We are confident that their role will continue in future.

The project brought a direct increase in girls' educational achievements, confidence and expectations, e.g. a significant percentage increase in end-of-year exam results. Project schools which have seen the direct benefits of additional tutorials to boost girls' learning during the double-shift school day, are keen to continue to enhance basic provision for all students; we hope that the increase in girls' expectations will be matched by continued expansion of education provision. At project start Tulla sub-city had just one High School, but now there are 5, with THS acting as a cluster centre, and still the only secondary school to offer Grades 11 and 12 (senior secondary grade– required for access to tertiary education).

These achievements, and validation of the project's distinct approach were confirmed by the project's external evaluation, which also commented on how much had been done with relatively sparse resources.

### **Challenges**

**National security** - although the long-running state of emergency was lifted at the end of Y2, border and inter-regional problems have continued, affecting communications, internal travel, and people's confidence to express views outside socially accepted norms – hence in part the project's aim to normalize a new attitude towards FGM/C and other HTPs to become those norms. The project area in Sidama, though bordering regions which have seen unrest, largely avoided direct problems until June 2018, when young activists

encouraged Sidama people to turn on their Weylata neighbours. A short period of localized attacks resulted in deaths, injuries and looting, which directly affected two people key to the project (the finance officer and Tulla High School director). With previous conflicts in nearby Shashemene, this was aimed to de-stabilize the new government, but Federal forces intervened; the Prime Minister came to Hawassa, Sidama and Weylata; elders met and mediated, and peace was restored. Since then, at national level, strides have been made by the new PM, bringing peace and a pro-women cabinet, and opening up the border with Eritrea. On the downside, government officers can be focused on political activities rather than their government responsibilities. In the context of this project, record-keeping on women and girls' issues has suffered.

Throughout the project, local **inflation** was far higher than we were allowed to provide for, posing serious challenges for salary and running costs. This was noted in the evaluation, which found some lack of resourcing and support, especially for the challenging task of local monitoring.

**Human resources** – there were significant changes in the implementing partner's team over the project, most significantly the change of IGA coordinator, and team leader in Hawassa. But this was managed with consistent central oversight and a diligent, new female team leader more than proved her worth. The team stayed together even as the project ended without a new project confirmed in the area.

### **Feedback and learning**

From October-December of Year 3 a series of three linked sharing and learning discussions gained feedback from some 1,620 community members/beneficiaries including 500 schoolgirls, reported in the document *Learning, Sharing and Planning*. Regular project monitoring by BL and DDP included interviews with key informants, gathering stories of former practitioners and informal discussion groups with girls' club members and school pupils/girls in the community. The project's independent external evaluation included key informant interviews with all relevant duty-bearers and government partners, and FDGs involving both direct project beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries in the target kebeles, as well as former practitioners, religious leaders, members of Anti-HTP Committees, and the field project team, in which the consultants sought to challenge and verify feedback on the project.

The articulation of anti-HTP plans at the end of each Community Conversation series illustrated the community's understanding of HTPs, as well as acting as a pledge to monitor and combat HTPs. Qualitative feedback has been a strong feature throughout the project, with women and girls' experiences captured in community meetings, especially the Community Conversations, or directly shared by role models such as uncut girls, and school returners who achieve academic success.

Regular large-scale events were held where experiences of role models (from ex-practitioners to schoolgirls) were showcased to an audience including parents, teachers, religious and community leaders and government stakeholders, often with media coverage so that the messages of anti-HTP champions could be shared with the broader community. Targeted learning events involved particular groups such as religious leaders and key government workers; and learning and experience were directly shared from girl to girl in forums such as FDGs and Girls' Club sessions. In Year 3, the Girls' Club learning activity included 27 boys from other clubs (such as HIV/AIDS, Health, Drama, Debating) to promote wider attitude change; the team commented positively on the rise of 'pro-girl' attitudes.

### **External evaluation**

DDP commissioned an independent external evaluation from Holster International Consultants in Addis Ababa: a woman-led consultancy with prior experience in both FGM/C and community behaviour change mechanisms, which was undertaken from July - September 2018.

Key findings were that community attitudes and behaviour had shifted substantially over the course of the project, leading to an estimated 80% reduction in FGM/C and other HTPs in the project area and also that improvements in (current and future) maternal health outcomes can be inferred, though hard data is lacking.

The evaluation commended the project approach, noting the effectiveness of Community Conversations, the strategy for changing HTP practitioners' mindsets and behaviour, and engaging religious leaders as allies.

### **Measuring change**

Feedback from HEWs working in the kebeles, from Tulla sub-city's Health Officer, and the community at large, indicated improvements in maternal mortality, poor birth experiences and delivery problems which can be attributed to factors such as FGM/C, early marriage and childbirth by underage girls. However, we were unfortunately unable to gain access to up-to-date official Zone-level data to support these findings.

Measuring FGM and HTP prevalence has also been a difficult area. There is little reliable hard data, nor is there likely to be. As our evaluators found, much of the commonly referenced data is not at all recent. Community feedback however indicates a growing shift away from such practices, with rates of FGM, for example, stated to have dropped from 89% to less than a third of girls currently being affected.

Information from the WCO on the incidence of HTP in the project's final year (116 in total, including 3 FGM/C cases conducted in neighbouring Malga woreda on girls from Tulla, plus 17 cases continuing from the previous year) shows a significant reduction (the Y2 figure was 253, with 5 cases of FGM). However, we are wary of assuming this is all explained by reduced occurrence, as it could also be (a) an increase in resolution of incidences within the community without recourse to the WCO or police, or (b) increased secrecy among perpetrators as community attitudes change. On balance, we are confident that it reflects a real reduction. The term 'measurement' is really a misnomer in this sensitive context – it is more accurately a case of community perception, as expressed in various contexts, from formal statements by government officials, to casual conversational comments about individuals known to have been cut, or anecdotal 'friends of friends' reports. Even the data we have obtained on violence against women/girls and child abuse in Tulla (recorded by the police and separately by the WC Officer) is not consistent.

Information on educational attainment has been provided by the Education Office and project schools, but again hampered by bureaucracy. Secondary graduation is the key indicator, as a pass secures entitlement and access to higher secondary classes, and then potentially to tertiary education. But Grade 10 results are provided to individual students via the school, which has to collate them itself. We visited schools when pupils were receiving their results, and saw the vast amount of paperwork for teaching staff, all working without computers. Feedback from school directors was obtained before 2017/2018 results were known.

### **Gender**

The patriarchal nature of Ethiopian society is well documented. The external evaluators cited a study which found that only 9% of women have control of family finances and decisions; wife-beating remains common. However, the younger generation of women are becoming more vocal in opposing harmful traditional practices, and in this project we have seen the continuation of a process of raising girls' achievements and respecting women's desire for independence, e.g. the livelihood opportunities provided for former FGM practitioners, and the enthusiasm which women denied schooling have followed FAL programmes.

Equally we have been concerned not to exclude men and boys. While some educational opportunities have been provided directly only to girls, schools have taken this model and extended it to boys, who also participate in whole school activities, including those with anti-HTP messages, supported by training workshops and mini-media activities. In the community, the support of men for the project's aims has been very important: in their roles as fathers, elders, and/or religious leaders (overwhelmingly male), their tacit or overt approval for change has been key. The role of Tulla police is also significant: under pressure from the project, more female police have been provided to deal with GBV, and Tulla's notorious night market (mainly selling the mild narcotic *chat*), a risky place for young women to pass, has been rigorously policed, leading to a significant reduction in cases of abduction, rape and forced marriage.

Thanks to the project team's hard work in the final year of the project, the percentage of men/boys directly engaged in Community Conversations increased from 19% to 25%, and the training programme for Girls' Club leaders was modified to include 27 boys active in other school clubs, e.g. HIV/AIDS, gender, environment). Their willingness to collaborate as equals with girls was noted and encouraged: an antidote to the prevailing misogyny where rejection of FGM can be seen as rejection of family rule and values, and an uncircumcised girl can even be described as 'deformed'.

### **Most vulnerable**

Over 90% of project beneficiaries are vulnerable and disadvantaged rural poor. Both DDP and BL come from a strong background in disability, and an understanding of the deep disadvantages faced by disabled children, youth, women and carers of disabled family members. Our introduction to the project area and its communities was through 6+ years of working to increase inclusion in education and economic opportunity; some of this projects' strongest allies in the community were parents of disabled children who had benefited from previous projects. We have noted that school clubs, such as that in Gemeto primary school, provide an opportunity for disabled children to participate and contribute, while school tutorials help boost the prospects of pupils disadvantaged by their gender as well as by disability. We are also happy to report that the 103 Functional Adult Literacy trainees (women who missed out on education, mostly working as street cleaners) all 'graduated' with a certificate of basic education, able to sign for themselves, with a level of numeracy to manage money and with increased commitment to support their own daughters in education.

### **Sustainability**

Agreements for future commitment were reached in August 2018 with the Tulla sub city government offices of Women and Children, Education, Health, police and target schools, and affirmed at a final phase-out meeting. At the community level, anti-HTP plans commit local people to continued efforts to combat FGM and other HTPs, and to support girls in education. Both these aims are aligned with Ethiopian government policy, and supported by the influential local religious and community leaders. Religious leaders, having taken on board the anti-FGM messages, will continue to preach against them.

### **Stakeholder collaboration**

The project's main stakeholders have been relevant local government departments in Hawassa – WCO, EO, HO, Cooperatives Office, police and judiciary, together with the directors and teachers of schools, and religious and community leaders. All had initial training/awareness-raising, reinforced through sharing and learning activities and regular contact throughout the project. BL organized experience-sharing for project team leaders e.g. with Stop Early Marriage in northern Ethiopia, and links with KMG in Sidama.

### **Economic sustainability**

Former FGM/C practitioners have been supported into alternative livelihoods, a key strand of the project's strategy. Of the 100 initially identified, all have ceased practising, and 72 benefited from IGA identification, seed funds and support. Towards project end, weaknesses in enterprise development noted by the external evaluator were addressed through further training and support, and lasting economic empowerment is now a reasonable expectation. The project's 24 Community Conversation mobilizers and 59 government HEWs have had their skills and capabilities built by the project. Tulla schoolgirls' opportunities have been directly improved through after-school tutorials leading to increased educational attainment and expectations, opening doors to higher education and better employment, and combating traditional stereotyping. 68 young mothers were welcomed back/supported to complete secondary education, and community attitudes have shifted towards female empowerment. 103 formerly illiterate women (Tulla street cleaners) are now able to read and write, and better able to support their children to avoid the same poverty trap.

## **Environmental sustainability**

The project has generally been environmentally neutral and resource-light, working through community activities. We have sought to make good use of appropriate local resources, e.g. buying local materials for livelihood activities, and coffee for the ceremonies which are an important part of Community Conversations. The project benefited from resources procured and used in previous projects, including vehicles and IT equipment; all these will remain in use in future.

Regular project visits by BL's Addis based monitoring and project management staff have mostly been by road, enabling other work visits en route, and reducing carbon footprint – except where internal unrest made air travel the only safe option. During other DDP/BL projects such visits were multi-purpose, with cost-sharing efficiencies and reduced environmental impact. They also gave BL opportunities to lobby local government, securing the use of land to establish a sustainable rehabilitation and project centre.

## **Social sustainability**

We aimed to promote cultural and behavioural change, by challenging negative gender stereotypes and harmful traditions, promoting positive and active images of women and girls, while at the same time valuing and supporting the positive aspects of traditional mechanisms such as social approval, conflict mediation, collective discussion and women-to women support, in order to reinforce beneficial traditional practices that improve the quality of life and prospects of girls and women. The project was fully aligned with both Ethiopian law which made FGM/C illegal in 1995, and the federal government's gender policies, which identify education as a route to economic empowerment.

## **Efficiency**

Community Conversations are a cost-effective mechanism for community change. For the cost of a cup of coffee, engagement was built among thousands of people. The project has strengthened other existing mechanisms, such as Anti-HTP Committees, to be able to carry out their roles. Modest inputs to engage religious leaders across the 12 kebeles secured widespread inclusion of anti-HTP themes in sermons and church/mosque discussion groups, which is likely to continue beyond the project without further input.

Events such as celebrating girls' achievements were run in partnership with the WCO and schools, so costs were shared, while the whole activity contributed to the project's objectives. The collaboration of government health workers was secured, and their activities enhanced, through training, capacity-building and participation in project events, while their salaries (the major cost) continued to be paid by the Health Office. The partnership was appreciated by HEWs and Health Office alike.

## **Effectiveness**

The external evaluator noted the effectiveness of engaging former practitioners to combat FGM/C and other HTPs; involving the full range of government actors – from the police to the Cooperatives Office – in sustainable collaboration; providing a wide, cross-community platform for collective action; and including influential religious leaders. Poverty reduction was achieved both directly (IGAs for former practitioners) and indirectly through educational support for girls, and for women who had missed out on school.

## **Multiplier effects**

DDP and BL are both keen to continue to replicate this work and its effective whole-community approach. This project grew organically out of previous community-based programmes, directly arising from an HTP study undertaken during our Comic Relief-funded ELGW project. We hope to sustain our 9-year engagement in Tulla subcity and Sidama, through agreements with community and government, and the learning from this project. We feel that strong community engagement is a prerequisite for challenging attitude change programmes such as this one, and the presence of partners, funders and government allies and community goodwill can lead to further successful projects.

## Case Study: Former practitioners “taking FGM to its end”

Marmite Wardolo and Mabrat Ware are two of the 90 practitioners of FGM/C and other harmful traditional practices in Tulla subcity, who have not only stopped practising, but become advocates against HTP.

We first met them through an earlier DDP programme with Berhan Lehetsanat - *Education and Livelihood Opportunities for Girls and Women (ELGW)* – where practitioners learned about the risks, abuses and illegality of their trade. They were offered an alternative livelihood, and enlisted to help lead community change. It was a case of ‘poacher turning gamekeeper’, which has enabled such women to keep (or increase) their social standing, earn from alternative occupations, and stop handing down their FGM ‘skills’ to their daughters.

Marmite and Mebret are redoubtable women, commanding respect in their communities. Marmite is a grandmother and widow of indeterminate age (between 60 and 70) who until recently needed to support a much older second husband, and so continued working covertly as a ‘cutter’ long after she knew it was both illegal and risky. A turning point was the painful and avoidable death of a young woman as a result of FGM/C, which brought back memories of the misery she herself had endured, and she changed direction.

From fattening and selling on a few sheep, Marmite diversified into chickens, eggs, and bought a cow with project support. She began to add her voice of experience to the project’s Community Conversations, the main mechanism used to persuade families to reject FGM. One of her daughters, Bezunesh Kiya, is a volunteer Community Conversation facilitator, and Marmite likes to join her sessions.

Mabrat, from a younger generation, and still raising 4 of her 5 children at home, had already rejected the family FGM practice to become a traditional birth attendant (TBA). Mabrat’s mother-in-law had taught her both skills, but she had never wanted to do FGM. Following a short course for TBAs on managing late delivery of the placenta, she realized the dangers of poorly supported home births and how much greater the risks of fistula and post-natal infection were for women who had also undergone FGM. At this time most women and girls in her village were affected. This made her question her role as a TBA, at a time when TBA practice was also being stopped by the government, and she began to look at other ways of helping girls and women by directing them to trained health workers, such as the village Health Extension Workers, our project allies.

Like Marmite, Mabrat came to know BL during an earlier project, but her engagement has grown. She is enthusiastic about her responsibilities: as a Community Conversation facilitator and a mother herself, she feels it is so important for mothers to protect their daughters from harm, and clearly links FGM/C with risks to both mothers and babies. Mabrat told us her two older daughters were circumcised, but not the youngest. She would make a great health extension worker, but despite her wide practical experience and evident capability, like many women of her generation she lacks the formal qualifications needed – which is perhaps why she is so enthusiastic about girls getting extra support in school. Mabrat has also joined her kebele’s Anti-HTP Committee, which polices the community anti-HTP plan signed at the end of their Community Conversations.

Anti-HTP Committees are a government idea which the project has sought to reinforce, partnership working being a key part of the implementation strategy. In each kebele’s Committee of 5-7 people, several are political appointees, observers rather than actors; the others include health extension workers and elders, who meet as needed to discuss community issues. Mabrat told us that about once a month they are all invited to attend an anti-HTP networking meeting at the WCO office to share experiences and information about any active practitioners, so they can be tracked and prevented. After the project ends, the aim is for anti-HTP committee networking to continue, but that will depend on the continuing engagement of government and community partners. And as the project’s external evaluation commented, more support is always needed for government initiatives, however well-intentioned, to become effective.



*Photo: Chris Hildebrand/DDP, 2018*

Marmite (centre) with her daughter  
Bezunesh (right) and Community Conversation  
coordinator Senait (left)

Like Marmite, Mabrat was one of the former practitioners to benefit from new livelihood training and opportunities. She was determined to earn something for herself and started out simply selling fruit and vegetables in the local market. Additional small business skills training in the project's final year encouraged her to get together with four other ex-practitioners to form a savings and credit group. Each group has a passbook and bank account. The women pooled the 2,260 BIRR (about £65) each received as seed funding to set up a small fruit and vegetable shop which also offers coffee, tea and snacks. They secured an additional loan from Oromia micro credit.

Mabrat's view is that the community conversations have been the most powerful force for change. She has seen a real shift in attitudes against FGM in Tulla: "Now we are taking it towards the end." The commitment made by Tulla's recently appointed Women and Children's Officer to roll out this process gives hope that this can and will happen in Mabrat's lifetime, if not perhaps in Marmite's.